

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

LIVING WITH A DIFFICULT HUSBAND

1 Peter 3:1-6

by

Steven J. Cole

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1 Peter Lesson 14

Living With A Difficult Husband
1 Peter 3:1-6

Someone has said, "Usually the husband regards himself as the head of the household, and the pedestrian has the right of way. And, usually, both of them are safe until they try to prove it" (*Reader's Digest* [2/83]). Preachers are probably safe until they speak on a text which tells wives to submit to disobedient husbands!

These verses are tough to explain and apply in light of our modern culture. It's tough enough to teach about the submission of wives to *godly* husbands. But to teach that wives should submit even to husbands who are ungodly seems cruel and insensitive. Wife abuse is widespread, even, sad to say, among evangelicals. Most of us are familiar with the family patterns in alcoholic homes, where a wife "enables" the husband in his wrong behavior. Many would argue that the wife's submission contributes to these problems rather than solves them. Is a wife supposed to submit in such situations? If so, what does that mean?

Furthermore, we live in a society that values individual rights, especially of those who are pushed down by the system (such as women). We're constantly encouraged to stand up for our rights and to fight back when we're wronged. Self-fulfillment is a supreme virtue in America, and those who are unfulfilled because of a difficult marriage are encouraged to do what they have to do to seek personal happiness. Submission to one's difficult husband is not usually one of the action points! Christian psychologist James Dobson wrote a book encouraging wives with disobedient husbands to practice "tough love." How does this fit in with submission?

To understand our text, we must see that Peter's theme (which began at 2:11) is still Christian witness in an alien world. In that society, a woman was expected to accept her husband's religion. If a wife became a Christian, she was viewed as being insubordinate. Thus the conversion of women was a culturally explosive situation. Peter didn't

want to compound the problem with a wife's defiant behavior. So he gives instruction on how Christian women could live with their unbelieving mates in a way that would bear witness for Christ.

We need to understand several things in approaching this text. First, the qualities Peter encourages these women to adopt apply to all Christians, both men and women. We all are to develop a submissive spirit, to be chaste, reverent, gentle and quiet, with an emphasis on the inner person rather than on outward appearance. So even though I direct my comments to wives who have unbelieving husbands, the principles apply to us all, men and women alike.

Second, Peter's comments do not give warrant for a Christian to enter a marriage with an unbelieving mate. Scripture is clear that believers are not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14; Exod. 34:12-16; Ezra 9:1-4). Peter was writing to women who had become Christians after marriage, but whose husbands were not yet believers. Also, the Apostle Paul clearly states that if an unbelieving mate consents to live with a believer, the believer must not initiate a divorce (1 Cor. 7:12-13). Rather, the believing wife should follow the principles Peter sets forth here, namely, that ...

A Christian wife should live with a difficult husband
so that he is attracted to Christ by her behavior.

Peter's point is that godly conduct is a powerful witness, much more powerful than words without conduct. He does not mean that verbal witness is not important. In the proper context, words are essential to communicate the content of the gospel. Peter's point is that disobedient husbands are more likely to be won by godly practice than by preaching from their wives. They will notice attractive behavior and through it be drawn to the source of that behavior—a relationship with Jesus Christ. I want to look at seven aspects of such attractive behavior and then answer three practical questions that arise.

1. Attractive behavior involves submission.

“In the same way” points back to 2:13 & 2:18. It does not mean that wives are to submit exactly as slaves submit to their masters (2:18; the word “likewise” in 3:7 is the same Greek word), but rather it connects this section to the whole discourse on Christian submission to authority. Those who argue for “evangelical feminism” quickly go to Ephesians 5:21 and point out that both husbands and wives are to submit to one another. They make that verse the all-governing one and explain 1 Peter as applying only to the first century because of cultural considerations.

But we can’t throw out the submission of wives to husbands so easily. Paul recognizes a sense in Christian marriage in which each partner submits to the other under Christ, but he also goes on to state that the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church. There is a sense in which Christ submits Himself to the church in self-sacrificing service, but at the same time, clearly He is in authority over the church. Before the late 20th century, it never occurred to scholars to interpret these texts the way modern evangelical feminists do. So I think we must interpret and apply them as written.

Before we look at what submission means, note two things about authority and submission. First, the purpose of authority is to protect and bless those under authority, not to benefit the one in authority. Because of sin, those in authority commonly abuse it and God will hold them accountable. But just because the one in authority abuses his position does not give those under authority the right to resist, unless they must resist in order to obey God.

Second, God never tells husbands to get their wives to submit to them. All the commands to submit are directed to wives, not to husbands. A husband who focuses on his authority is out of line. His responsibilities are to love his wife sacrificially (Eph. 5:25) and to live with her in an understanding way, granting her honor (1 Pet. 3:7). Not once is there a command to husbands to get their wives into submission. A husband who suppresses, restricts, or puts down his wife is not exercising proper authority.

What, then, does submission mean? The Greek word is a military term meaning to place in rank under someone. But the biblical spirit of submission involves far more than just grudgingly going along with orders (as often happens in the military). Rather, submission is the attitude and action of willingly yielding to and obeying the authority of another to please the Lord. Some say that the Bible never tells a wife to obey her husband, but Peter holds up Sarah's obedience to Abraham as an example of biblical submission.

Attitude is crucial. A disobedient little boy was told to sit in the corner. He said, "I may be sitting on the outside, but I'm standing on the inside." That's defiance, not submission. On the other hand, a person under authority can be strong in arguing for a point of view and yet have a submissive attitude. Submission involves an attitude of respect and a recognition of the responsibility of the one in authority. Rather than trying to thwart his will through manipulation or scheming, a submissive wife will seek to discover what her husband wants and do it to please him, as long as it doesn't involve disobedience to God.

When Peter says that Sarah called Abraham lord, he is not setting down a mandate for all times. I heard of a wife who fell into bed and exclaimed, "Lord, I'm tired!" Her husband calmly said, "My dear, in the privacy of our own bedroom, you can call me Jim." Proper submission doesn't require addressing your husband as lord. But the principle is, submission is reflected by your speech. The tone of your voice and the words you speak reflect whether you respect your husband and are in submission to him, or whether you're in a power struggle against him.

The source of many marital problems is that the wife is seeking to control the husband to meet what she perceives as her needs and the husband is seeking to dominate the wife to meet what he perceives as his needs. So you have a constant tug of war going on. That's not the biblical pattern for husbands or wives. The biblical pattern is for the wife to yield control to the husband and to do all she can to please him and make him prosper. The husband is not to dominate, but to do all he can to bless and protect his wife so that she prospers in the Lord. Here's the catch: You can't wait for your partner to come up to some acceptable level of performance before you start to do your part. You must

obey what God has told you to do and let Him take care of your partner.

2. Attractive behavior involves purity.

“Chaste” (3:2) can be translated “purity” (NIV). It is used in the New Testament to refer to abstaining from sin (1 Tim. 5:22). John uses this word when he tells us to purify ourselves just as Jesus is pure (1 John 3:3). This means that a wife who wants to win her husband to Christ must live in obedience to God. She will be morally pure. Her husband won’t distrust her because she’s a flirt with other men. She won’t use deception or dishonesty to try to get her own way. She will learn to handle anger in a biblical way. Her hope will be in God (3:5) so that she will have a sweet spirit, even toward a difficult husband. He will see Christlikeness in her.

3. Attractive behavior involves reverence.

This could mean respect toward her husband (which a wife is to show, Eph. 5:33), but because Peter’s uses of “fear” in the preceding context refer to reverence toward God (2:17, 18), I take it that way here. The idea is that a godly wife will live in the fear of God, aware that He sees all that is going on (“in the sight of God,” 3:4). To live in the fear of God means that we recognize His holiness and wrath against all sin and therefore live obediently, even when it’s hard.

4. Attractive behavior involves not nagging.

Peter says that the disobedient husbands may be won without a word as they *observe* (not, “hear about”) the pure and reverent behavior of their wives. By “without a word” he doesn’t mean that a wife is to be mute. He means that she must not nag or preach to her husband. Nothing will drive a man further from the Lord than a nagging wife. Solomon said it 3,000 years ago, and it’s still true, “It is better to live in a corner of a roof, than in a house shared with a contentious woman” (Prov. 21:9). And, “the contentions of a wife are a constant dripping” (Prov. 19:13b). Nagging will drive your husband crazy, but it won’t drive him to Christ.

I heard about a husband who nicknamed his wife Peg although that wasn't her name. When he was asked why, he replied, "Well, Peg is short for Pegasus who was an immortal horse, and an immortal horse is an everlasting nag, so that's why I call my wife Peg!" Nagging will do one of two things to men: Either it will make him resist and become obstinate, or he will give in to keep the peace. Either response is not good for the wife. If the husband becomes more obstinate, he can become abusive. This creates distance in the relationship. If he gives in to keep the peace, he becomes passive and the wife is put in the role of the decision maker, out from under the covering of blessing and protection that God designed proper authority to be.

Thus attractive behavior involves submission, purity, reverence toward God, and not nagging.

5. Attractive behavior involves a gentle and quiet spirit.

Peter says that such a spirit is precious in the sight of God. I would also add that it is precious in the sight of a husband! What does it mean? "Gentle" is the word sometimes translated "meek." It is used of Jesus (Matt. 11:29; 21:5). It does not mean weakness of the Caspar Milquetoast variety, but rather strength under submission or control. A horse that is powerful but responsive to the slightest tug of its master is a "gentle" horse. So it refers to a wife who is not selfishly assertive, but rather who yields her rights without yielding her strength of character.

"Quiet" does not mean mute, but rather tranquil or calm, not combative. A quiet woman exudes a confidence in her role and giftedness. She is not out to prove anything, because she is secure in who she is in the Lord. She may be "quiet" and yet be articulate and persuasive in presenting her point of view. But she doesn't do it in a demanding or obnoxiously assertive way. She is at peace with herself in the Lord. The word "spirit" hints that these qualities are broad enough to allow room for personality differences.

6. Attractive behavior involves doing what is right.

You have become Sarah's children "if you do what is right." Peter emphasizes this concept (2:12, 14, 15, 20; 3:6, 11, 13, 16, 17; 4:19). It always occurs in the context of others doing wrong toward us and points to the fact that our behavior shouldn't be determined by how others treat us. We're so prone to react to wrong treatment with more wrong treatment and then to blame our sin on the other person's sin. But God wants us to be prepared to respond to wrongs against us by doing what is right.

If your husband yells at you and you yell back, it escalates the conflict. He will yell louder, then you yell louder yet, and if things get out of hand, he may lose control and say all sorts of nasty things that he wouldn't say when he's more rational or he may even hit you. But if he yells at you and you calmly respond, "I can understand why you're upset. What can I do to help?" you've just de-escalated the quarrel. How can a man fight with that kind of response?

7. Attractive behavior involves an emphasis on the inner person over outward appearance.

The point of 3:3-4 is not that a woman should neglect her outward appearance, but rather that her emphasis should be on the inner person. He is not forbidding all braiding of hair or wearing of jewelry, or else he's also forbidding wearing dresses! Peter's point is that the emphasis should be on attractive character qualities, which are imperishable, not on elaborate outward attractiveness, which necessarily fades with age. Inner beauty is attractive even to a godless husband, and it enhances a woman's outward appearance.

A young officer who was blinded during a war met and later married one of the nurses who took care of him in the hospital. One day he overheard someone say, "It was lucky for her that he was blind, since no one who could see would marry such a homely woman." He walked toward the voice and said, "I overheard what you said, and I thank God from the depths of my heart for blindness of eyes that might have kept me from seeing the marvelous worth of the soul of this woman who is my wife. She is the most noble character I have ever known; if the conformation of her features is such that it might have

masked her inward beauty to my soul then I am the great gainer by having lost my sight." (Donald Barnhouse, *Let Me Illustrate* [Revell], p. 156.) Outer beauty fades, but inner beauty grows stronger over time.

So Peter's point is that a Christian wife should live with an unbelieving husband so that he is attracted to Christ by her beautiful behavior.

CONCLUSION

I want to conclude by briefly answering three practical questions that arise on this topic:

1) Must a wife submit to an abusive husband?

Peter's words, "even if any of them are disobedient to the word" show that he wasn't just thinking about nice husbands. So we must conclude that a wife may need to submit to some abuse. The difficult question is, How much? My view is that a wife must submit to verbal and emotional abuse, but if the husband begins to harm her physically, she needs to call civil or church authorities. There are civil laws against battery and it is proper for an abused wife to call in authorities to confront and deal with a husband who violates the law. Although physical abuse is not a biblical basis for divorce, I would counsel separation in some cases to protect the wife while the husband gets his temper under control. But even in such situations, a Christian wife must not provoke her husband to anger and she must display a gentle spirit.

I take the words, "without being frightened by any fear" to mean that a woman should not fear her husband's intimidation more than she fears God (see 3:2, "with fear" [of God]; 3:14-15). If he tries to scare her into giving up her faith, she must not go along with him.

2) Must a wife submit to a husband who asks her to do something wrong?

Some say that because Sarah went along with Abraham's sinful schemes to pawn her off as his sister (Gen. 12:10-20; 20:1-18), that

wives should obey their husbands even when they're told to do something sinful. But that would be a violation of the higher principle that we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). Peter's words, "do what is right" (3:6), show that he is not counseling sinful behavior in the name of submission to a disobedient husband. But, again, if you as a wife must disobey your husband in order to obey God, you can do it in a submissive spirit, letting him know that you love him and want to please him, but it is more important that you obey God.

3) Can a wife be submissive and yet confront her husband's sin?

In other words, is there a proper place for "tough love"? I think the answer is "Yes, but be careful!" Love seeks the highest good of the one loved, and sometimes that means confronting sin. But sometimes love covers a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8), so love doesn't mean jumping on your husband's every sin as if you were the Holy Spirit. If you must confront, you should do it in as appealing a way as possible, so that your husband can see that you really care for him. You may say, "Honey, I love you and I value our relationship. But when you drink, it hurts both you and our relationship. You need to get help. I'm not going to cover for your behavior the next time you're drunk."

Several years ago a woman in my church came to me, accompanied by two elders' wives. They proceeded to tell me how unbearable her home life was. Her husband, who had made a profession of faith in Christ after I had shared the gospel with him, was an alcoholic. He was also devoted to his job more than to his family. He was not meeting his wife's emotional needs. They all had read James Dobson's *Love Must Be Tough* and agreed that she needed to create an ultimatum by leaving her husband if he didn't stop drinking and begin acting toward his family as he should.

I listened and then gently asked where in the Bible they found warrant for a wife leaving her husband because of drinking. One of the elder's wives, who was on the staff of a Christian organization, exploded at me for my insensitivity in quoting Bible verses at this hurting woman. I calmly replied that the Bible was my only guide for such situations and that if they didn't want to follow that, I couldn't help

them. I proceeded to explain the concept of 1 Peter 3 and of Hebrews 12, that God sometimes puts us in difficult situations to refine our faith, but that we must obey His Word to reap the benefits.

They left my office and the woman began to apply 1 Peter 3 to herself. The Lord began showing her many ways that she was being selfish and manipulative. She began to seek to please her husband and submit to him. Eventually, he quit drinking and began spending more time with his family. A few months ago, the wife thanked me and said that if I had not stood my ground that day she came to me, she and her husband would be divorced today.

That woman proved what Peter is saying here, that a Christian wife's behavior should be so beautiful that it attracts her difficult, disobedient husband to her Savior. That should be your overall goal in all your dealings with your husband. Next week I'll hit the husbands, but today I ask each wife, even if your husband is a believer, to take a look at your behavior in this spiritual mirror and ask, "Is it attractive? Does it make my husband want to follow my Lord Jesus Christ?"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does submission mean that a wife must suppress her personality and opinions?
2. How should a godly woman deal with her husband's constant verbal abuse?
3. Discuss how the "tough love" concept can be both helpful and dangerous.
4. Should a Christian wife with an unbelieving husband assume responsibility for the spiritual training of the children?

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